

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER

St. John the Evangelist¹

(December 27)

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Rector

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.

“Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Chapter of the First Epistle General of John.⁴

“Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also

that is begotten of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous. For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one. If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

Today we are going to look at what St. John says in the Second Lesson for this evening, and we’re going to look at it on two levels. The first is what I will call the historical level, and the second I will call the sacramental level.

John says that Jesus came by water and by blood, and that the Holy Spirit is witness to His identity as the Son of God. We begin on the historical level with the scene of Jesus’ baptism, a scene that St. John the Evangelist reports as a brief “flashback” by John the Baptist: “John bore witness to him, and cried, ‘This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.’”⁵)”

That, of course, is a reference to what occurred at Jesus' Baptism by the John the Baptizer. However, despite this reference in his Epistle, St. John does not describe that Baptism itself in his Fourth Gospel, although it is related in each of the other three Gospels. Here is St. Mark's version:

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, ‘Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.’”⁶

The baptism of Jesus marked His public debut, His coming out if you will, and the beginning of his earthly ministry. But that ministry, with all the teaching, and all the healing, was not complete until it was ended by the shedding of His Blood on the Cross.

So Jesus came by water, but not by water only; with water and blood. The Holy Spirit bore witness, not only at His Baptism but on the Day of Pentecost as well when He inspired St. Peter to proclaim to the masses, “God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

So when John says, “There are three witnesses: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree,” we can understand what he means on the historical level by recalling the Baptism, the Crucifixion and the Pentecost experience. But there are always deeper meanings in the writings of St. John, let us go deeper. Let us go to the sacramental level to see how this passage relates to us today.

First let me remind you how the Prayer Book defines a Sacrament. In the Second Office of Instruction,⁷ Sacrament is defined as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiri-

tual grace given unto us; ordained by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive this grace, and a pledge to assure us thereof.”

What happens in a Sacrament is that a spiritual reality presents itself to our senses through some temporal or physical reality. In Baptism that physical reality is water. It is through water that Christ enters our lives and begins His work of re-creating us.

But that is only the beginning. The Sacrament of Confirmation is generally thought of, at least in the West, as the completion of Baptism. In that Sacrament, the Holy Spirit comes through the laying on of the bishop’s hands in response to a confession of faith, to confirm the conviction that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and the Savior of the world. After we are confirmed, Jesus comes to us in and through the bread and wine that represent His broken Body and His poured out Blood.

It is the spiritual reality in a Sacrament that is in control, and to get the benefit of the Sacrament, we must respond to it on the spiritual level. It’s not enough just to get wet, and it’s not enough just to swallow the bread and the wine. Something else is required, and that something else is faith. Faith that Jesus does in fact come to us in the Sacraments we receive; faith that he is able to release us from the bondage of sin and to make us into people fit to live in His kingdom; faith in His promise to bring us before the throne of His Father and present us holy and blameless; faith that as He overcame the woes inflicted on Him by the world and emerged victorious even over death when He came in water and in blood, so He can enable us to do the same when He comes to us again in the Sacraments that we receive.

There are three that bear witness: the Spirit, the water and the blood, and these three agree. If you believe their witness, you may be assured of the presence of Christ in your life and you may rest in the assurance that His power will protect you in the midst of whatever the world and the devil may throw at you.

“This is the victory that overcomes the world,” says the writer, “even our faith.”

You have that assurance because a Sacrament is not only the means by which Christ comes to us but is also the pledge of the gifts that He brings to us when we receive them. And that leads me back to the definition of a Sacrament: “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us; ordained by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive this grace, and a pledge to assure us thereof.”

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St. David’s Anglican Catholic Church
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¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Holy Communion on the First Sunday after Easter, 2013.

² *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 31 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxii (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xx (CIPBC 1963).

³ Isaiah 6:1-8 (KJV).

⁴ I John 5:1-12 (KJV).

⁵ St. John 1:15 (RSV).

⁶ St. Mark 1:9-11 (RSV).

⁷ *Offices of Instruction, Second Office*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 292 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).